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Draft report

Chapter III

General debate

1. Statements in the general debate were made by the following States members of the Committee on Information: Algeria, Antigua and Barbuda (on behalf of the Group of 77 and China), Bangladesh, Belarus, Benin, Brazil, Cape Verde, China, Croatia, Cuba, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Egypt, France (on behalf of the European Union), Iceland, India, Indonesia, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Israel, Jamaica, Japan, Kazakhstan, Mexico (on behalf of the Rio Group), Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, the Republic of Korea, the Russian Federation, Senegal, Sri Lanka, the Sudan, Switzerland, the Syrian Arab Republic (on behalf of the Group of Arab States), Thailand, Ukraine, the United States of America and Yemen. Statements were also made by Palestine and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, both attending the session as observers.

2. The general debate was preceded by statements by the Chairman of the Committee and the Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information of the Department of Public Information.

3. In taking up the substantive questions before the Committee, speakers emphasized the central role of the United Nations in global affairs and of the Department of Public Information as its public voice. One speaker, addressing the Committee on behalf of a large group, said that his group fully supported the work of the Department in promoting and advancing the work of the Organization through continued campaigns on issues of importance to the international community. Emphasizing the need for providing accurate, impartial, comprehensive and timely information to the Member States and the wider international community on the work of the United Nations, the speaker said that it was important that there be a consistent message between the Department and any other entity that provided information on the United Nations.

4. Another speaker, addressing the meeting on behalf of a large group, observed that the work done by the Department of Public Information contributed to a better

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understanding of the tasks that the United Nations carried out in various fields. His group recognized the efforts by the Department to strengthen cooperation with other organs of the United Nations, and emphasized that strengthening such cooperation would contribute to a broader and truthful dissemination of the tasks the Organization carried out in order to comply with its responsibilities in the maintenance of international peace and security. Another speaker "welcomed with satisfaction" the Department's elaboration of a strategic workplan based on the priority themes of the Organization. Those efforts should be pursued with particular attention to the needs of Member States, particularly the countries of the southern hemisphere, Africa and the least developed countries, he said. Another speaker expressed the hope that the Department would continue to enhance its efficiency by coordinating within its organizations, networking with other United Nations organizations, and creating partnerships with civil societies among others within its existing resources.

5. Another speaker, who represented a large group, said that the Committee needed activity reports with precise figures and comments that clearly evaluated results, spelled out differences and proposed solutions for resolving them in order to do a good job. His group, the speaker said, had set three priorities for the current session. The first was to improve the effectiveness of the Department within its budget constraints. That applied in particular to information centres, which were essential instruments for the Department to promote the United Nations and its main issues. The second priority was the effort to advance multilingualism, and the third was streamlining the resolution on questions relating to information. Another speaker, arguing for avoiding "the pitfalls of politicization and of excessively ideological positions," expressed the opinion that the Committee, by basing its work on the search for pragmatic and common sense solutions, should be able to produce clearer and more specific guidelines for the Department of Public Information.

6. Commenting on the role of the Committee on Information, one speaker argued that the Committee had a central role in examining United Nations public information policies and activities "with a view to promoting the idea of a just and more effective world information and communications order." To achieve this goal, the speaker said, "the Committee should increase its efforts to formulate an effective and efficient United Nations information policy that would ensure a greater understanding and respect among peoples belonging to various societies, cultures and religions." Another speaker observed that the defining feature of the work of the Committee on Information lay in its relationship with the Department of Public Information. "The resultant cooperative effort must constantly seek to improve upon the delivery of relevant information inputs to millions of users worldwide", he commented.

7. Several speakers discussed the importance of achieving linguistic parity in the work of the Department. One speaker, speaking on behalf of a large group, noted his group's concern at the increasing gap among websites in different official languages. "More resources should be allocated to achieve equality among all official languages in order to bridge this gap taking into account the specificity of some official languages which use non-Latin and bidirectional scripts," he said. Another speaker, echoing a similar view, said that his Group had noted the efforts that had been made by the Department, but was of the view that possible further improvement of the Arab page on the website was needed. More effort was required in order to achieve full parity by allocating human and material resources in a

manner that took into account the peculiar nature of the Arabic language. Advocating for multilingualism, another speaker, speaking on behalf of a large group, acknowledged that much had been done, but that "the situation is not satisfactory." He said that his group would pay close attention to make sure that all the resources available for that purpose to the Department were indeed used to achieve the common objectives.

8. Another speaker argued that in order to ensure that people in all parts of the world received as full information as possible about the United Nations, it was fundamental that the United Nations spoke in as many languages as possible, not only its official languages. The speaker referred to a recent agreement between the United Nations and the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries, which she said would further increase the cooperation between the United Nations and the Community and facilitate the dissemination of information about the United Nations in Portuguese-speaking countries. Another speaker, while applauding the Department's efforts to foster parity among the six official languages and to enhance accessibility for the disabled, suggested that, given the limitation of resources, "it would be practical to focus on more widely used languages in strengthening the United Nations website."

9. Several speakers suggested that the traditional means of communications, such as radio and print media, continued to be important in achieving effective promotion of the message of the Organization. One speaker, representing a large group, argued that such traditional means were still the "fundamental means" to obtain information in developing countries. He said "We believe that the presentation of radio programmes should be encouraged in as many languages as possible, including Portuguese and indigenous languages." Another speaker, representing a large group, asked the Department of Public Information to continue to strengthen its relationship with radio stations and local journalists of Member States.

10. Commenting on the uneven access to technological development and new information and communications technologies, one speaker noted that more than 2 billion people had never used a telephone and did not know the word "Internet". It was, therefore, worthwhile to reconsider approaches to the technological revolution. It was necessary to begin to devise practical ways to rationally use information technology to close the technological and social gaps, the speaker said. Several other speakers asked the Department to play a more vigorous role in bridging the current "digital divide" between developed and developing countries.

11. Several speakers underlined the importance of closer cooperation between the Department of Public Information, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations and the Department of Field Support. One speaker, representing a large group, took note of the current cooperation among those departments and of the effort of the Department of Public Information to disseminate information on peacekeeping operations. The Group hoped to receive more information on the functions and scope of orientation and support activities that the Department of Public Information carried out, taking into account the creation of the Public Affairs Unit in the Office of the Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations. Another speaker urged the Department of Public Information to highlight success stories and to provide accurate, impartial and timely information on the regular activities of United Nations peacekeepers, including, the speaker said, the work "they often do that goes beyond the routine keeping of the peace and the call of duty." Another

speaker, referring to the important work being done by peacekeepers from his country, asked the Department of Public Information to publicize the work of United Nations peacekeepers with a national angle. Referring to the sixtieth anniversary of United Nations peacekeeping in 2008, one speaker noted that the joint efforts by the Department of Public Information, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations and the Department of Field Support had resulted in more accurate, comprehensive and timely information on United Nations peacekeeping.

12. A number of speakers referred to the importance of intercultural and interreligious dialogue and asked the Department of Public Information to play a more vigorous role in promoting the dialogue among civilizations. Several speakers deplored all acts of insult and incitement against religions and their sacred principles and percepts. Several speakers welcomed the Secretary-General's condemnation on the airing of a film that had hurt the sentiments of many cultural and religious groups and also threatened the stability of many societies. One speaker asked the Department to redouble its efforts "not only to sensitize the media but also Member States on the need to understand and respect various cultures and beliefs." The same sentiment was expressed by another speaker who, speaking on behalf of a large group, noted that the Department had the responsibility to raise awareness in order to consolidate respect and understanding of different cultures, so as to promote the value of peace.

13. A few speakers applauded the Department for its outreach programme on the Holocaust. Speakers also lauded the Department for its efforts to mark the first International Day of Remembrance for the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade.

14. One speaker, representing a large group, commended the Department for its implementation of the Special Programme on the Question of Palestine. The programme, he said, was useful in offering an annual training programme for Palestinian broadcasters and journalists from the Occupied Palestinian Territory to assist them in developing their media capacity and skills. Another speaker called on the Department to develop more programmes and activities, "so that Palestinians could enjoy their right to self-determination and to an independent State."

15. The work and activities of the network of United Nations information centres were commented on by several speakers. A speaker, addressing the Committee on behalf of a large group, urged that all possible measures be taken to strengthen the United Nations information centres. "These centres," he said, "are a vital source for the flow of information. They help bridge the gap between the developed and developing countries in terms of access of information and communications technologies." Another speaker noted that the information centres not only represented the Department of Public Information as its field offices, "but also symbolize a bridge that connects the local people with the United Nations and its activities." Another speaker, representing a large group, noted with satisfaction the initiatives taken by the Regional Centre in Brussels to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Speakers also took note of the steps taken by the Department to strengthen the information centres, including through increased cooperation among them at the regional level.

16. One speaker, representing a large group, emphasized that any decision to reorganize the information centres must be made in close consultation with the host countries and take into account the geographical, linguistic and technological

characters of different regions. Another speaker expressed support for the Department's efforts to rationalize United Nations information centres and hoped that the Department would link the United Nations information centre regionalization process "with a system-wide evaluation of all United Nations offices worldwide." He said his country would like to see the United Nations continue efforts to house all United Nations system country offices under one roof and with one central public information unit. Another speaker, representing a large group, encouraged the Department and Member States to work together to explore creative ways to ensure the necessary support and progressive strengthening of the network of information centres and services. She also regretted that despite the offer by the Government of Angola to host and provide rent-free and maintenance-free premises for a United Nations Information Centre in Luanda, no progress was made towards the creation of an information centre to address the special needs of Portuguese-speaking countries.

17. Several speakers commented on the Department's outreach programme. One speaker welcomed the dynamic partnerships between the Department and civil society, educators, students, celebrities and the private sector. Such partnerships made it possible to ensure transmission of an increasingly integrated message by the United Nations, he said. Another speaker commended the Department for its increased cooperation with civil society organizations and its enhanced focus on young people as a strategic audience for its work. Reaching young people should be a top priority in all actions of the international community to promote the values and work of the Organization. The Model United Nations programme, in which 400,000 students participated worldwide every year, was a good example of how to educate young people about the United Nations, he said.

18. Referring to a request by the Department of Public Information to rename the Dag Hammarskjöld Library to Dag Hammarskjöld Library and Knowledge Sharing Centre, a speaker representing a large group emphasized that any process to change the name and methods of operation of the United Nations Libraries "should continue to respect previously agreed mandates and General Assembly resolutions, and be subject to prior intergovernmental discussions and agreement." He also urged the Department that the application of technological innovations for the provision of library services "take into account the physical and other challenges faced by Member States in being able to effectively utilize such technology."

19. The observance of World Press Freedom Day was noted by several speakers. Speaking on behalf of a large group, one speaker observed that the annual observance was particularly important for the Committee on Information. Every year, the Committee reaffirmed in the first part of its resolution the principles of freedom of information, independence, plurality and diversity of the media, and it urged all States to ensure that journalists could work freely and effectively. Every year, the Committee also resolutely condemned all attacks against all journalists. In 2007, 65 journalists had been killed and so far in 2008, 8 had been killed, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. That was far too many and the Committee had a collective responsibility to put an end to it, he said. Another speaker, noting with alarm the increasing number of attacks on journalists worldwide, said that his Government stood ready to contribute to all efforts that would preserve and protect the principles of freedom and the press and freedom of information.